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ABSTRACT

Elementary school children were questioned about what and why they read. The 20 children, four each from kindergarten and grades one, three, four, and six, included 12 boys and 8 girls. The teachers were asked to send two good readers and two poor readers from each grade, without indicating which children were good or poor readers. During interviews, if the children indicated reading nonassigned materials for their own purposes, they were judged by the interviewer to be good readers. If they indicated reading only assigned materials for purposes of learning to read or to please others, they were judged to be poor readers. These classifications matched the teachers' classifications exactly. The good and poor readers could be differentiated on the basis of their reasons for reading, regardless of absolute reading levels. Among the things that the good readers read were highway signs, newspapers, and trade books. These children read nonassigned materials in and out of school for many of the same reasons that adults read. They understood what reading was and what it had to offer them. In contrast, the poor readers read only assigned materials in order to "learn the words," and did not understand that reading was a meaningful process. All of these children had adequate oral language skills, learned in an environment saturated with oral language. Educators need to create a similar environment saturated with written language to encourage reading skills. (HTH)

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WHY DO CHILDREN READ

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WHY DO CHILDREN READ

Reading, like the other language skills, is a functional skill. As adults we read to meet needs and solve problems, to make our lives in someway better. Why do children read? I asked some elementary school children that question recently. What they told me suggests that the answer is different for good and poor readers. What they had to say also tells us something about an ingredient that is essential to an elementary reading program.

According to an international panel (Sullivan, 1976) people read for the following purposes:

To solve particular problems or maintain or improve their lives.

To help others.

To seek support and encouragement of their beliefs and practices.

To attain a particular economic level by gaining or improving job skills, or learning to manage resources.

To seek psychological escape.

To find pleasure and joy in the written word.

To expand and enlarge their environment and horizons.

To seek self-improvement or fulfillment.

To seek political participation.

As suggested by Page and Pinell (1979) I recently asked some elementary school children to think about all the things they had read during the last week. I then asked them to tell me what they had read and why they had read it. The 20 children, four each from kindergarten and grades one, three, four, and six, included 12 boys and 8 girls. The teachers were asked to send two good readers and two poor readers from each grade, without indicating which children were poor and good readers. After talking with the children, I classified them as good or poor readers. If they indicated reading non-assigned materials for their own purposes, I judged them to be good readers. If they indicated reading only assigned materials for purposes of learning to read or to please others, I judged them to be poor readers. The teachers then classified them as good or poor readers, based on classroom performance.

My classification and that of their teachers matched exactly. A good kindergarten reader might only be able to read a few simple words, while a poor sixth-grade reader might be capable of reading materials written on a tird or fourth-grade level. The good and poor readers could be differentiated on the basis or their reasons for reading, irrespective of absolute reading levels

Good Readers

Here are some of the things that the good readers read, and their reasons for doing so. A kindergarten boy read signs on the highway to help his dad. A first-grade boy read crumpled papers from wastebaskets to, "know what they mean". Another read comics because, "They are so funny they make me laugh." Some second-graders read parts of the newspaper, the television page and movie ads, to plan their entertainment. A third-grade girl read a book on ballet because, "When I was three I took baby ballet and I never knew what they were doing. Now I know their secrets." These good readers also read trade books, "because it's exciting," and "just for the heck of it." One read a "baby story" to her neice, "because it's her favorite book." They also read boardwork and school papers, "to know what to do"; content texts to learn how to do things or to learn about things. They read basal readers, "to know what the story's about," and "to get into more difficult words."

These children read non-assigned materials in and out of school for many of the purposes Sullivan (1976) listed for reading. They had problems to solve and needs to meet, and had found printed language that could help to solve some of those problems and meet some of those needs. They understood what reading was, and what it had to offer them. In addition they read to perfect the skills of reading, a purpose not mentioned by Sullivan (1976).

Poor Readers

In contrast, the poor readers from kindergarten to sixth-grade mentioned reading only assigned materials in order to, "learn the words"; "to tell the words"; "so you know all the words"; "to tell my parents the words I know"; and "because you have to learn to say the words right." These poor readers seemed to read only assigned materials, and primarily for purposes of perfecting the skills of reading. They did not seem to have found printed materials which could meet needs they felt or solve problems they had. They didn't understand what reading was, but rather viewed it as an oral process in which the task was to pronounce words correctly. This is sad, but not new or surprising. Both Johns (1970) and Tovey (1976) have found that children view reading as a word-calling process. These poor readers certainly didn't understand that the first basic in reading is, "that reading is a meaningful process" (Greenslade, 1980).

Each child that mentioned reading only assigned materials for purposes related to perfecting reading skills was asked if s/he could think of anything s/he had ever read to find out more about how to do something, or to find out more about something of interest, or just for fun. Most said, "No." One recalled reading directions for building a model with his brother.

Conclusions

All of these children had adequate oral langauge skils. This was evident from our conversations. The majority of children develop oral language skills without organized instruction and in a manner which we do not yet fully understand. Although we do not yet know the "how" we think that at least part of the "why" is the environment--saturated with oral language--in which the young child exists. The child has needs to meet and problems to solve, and the development of listening and speaking skills helps to meet some of those needs and solve some of those problems. The child has strong personal purposes for oracy. The child in our classrooms has needs to meet and prolems to solve. Written language can help to meet some of those needs and solve some of those problems. As educators we need to create an environment--saturated with written language--in which our students can find strong personal purposes for developing literacy skills. Our students should find the classroom a place in which there is an abundance of written language to meet their needs, help solve their problems, and pose new problems and solutions on the first day of school and throughout every day of school.

The prereader and beginning reader need language experience activities to learn what reading is and to develop and understanding of the language of reading instruction (Hall, 1976).

As the child learns to read s/he needs direct instruction in the skills of reading in a structured, organized program (Harris, 1979). But this is not enough. The classroom must contain an abundance of printed materials which children can use to meet needs and solve problems; and the program must provide children with the time, in school, to seek out printed materials they want and need to use, and to use them for their own purposes. This will provide the "why". Without it the "what" and "how" are meaningless. If the poor readers I talked to had found their schoolrooms places where there were printed materials available to meet their needs and solve their problems, where time was allowed for them to select from and use these materials for their own purposes, they might have become better readers.

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